THE CHRISTMAS STORY

from

David Harum

by

EDWARD NOYES WESTCOTT

THE WILLIAM H. CRANE EDITION

ILLUSTRATED WITH PICTURES FROM THE PLAY

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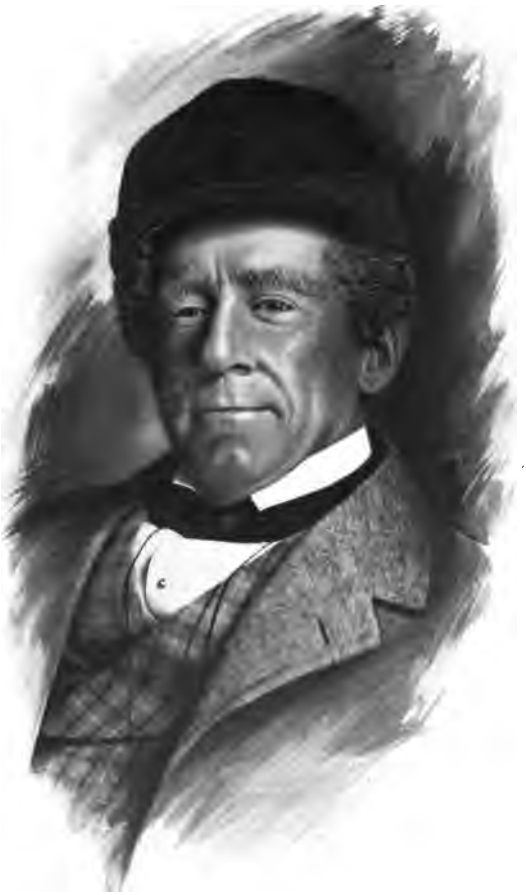


WM. H. CRANE AS DAVID HARUM

WM. H. CRANE EDITION

THE CHRISTMAS STORY FROM DAVID HARUM

By

Edward Noyes Westcott

ILLUSTRATED FROM MR. CHARLES FROHMAN'S PRODUCTION OF DAVID HARUM. A COMEDY DRAMATIZED FROM THE NOVEL

NEW YORK
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
1900

PREFACE

"DAVE done the thing his own way," said Aunt Polly to the Widow Cullom. "Kind o' fetched it round fer a merry Chris'mus, didn't he?"

This is the story which is reprinted here from Mr. Westcott's famous book. It was David Harum's nature to do things in his own way, and the quaintness of his methods in raising the Widow Cullom from the depths of despair to the heights of happiness frame a story which is read between laughter and tears, and always with a quickening of affection for the great-hearted benefactor. David Harum's absolute originality, his unexpectedness, the dryness of his humor, the shrewdness of his insight, and the kindliness and

generosity beneath the surface, have made him a permanent figure in literature. Moreover, the individual quality of David Harum is so distinctively American that he has been recognized as the typical American, typical of an older generation, perhaps, in mere externals, but nevertheless an embodiment of characteristics essentially national. While only Mr. Westcott's complete book can fully illustrate the personality of David Harum, yet it is equally true that no other episode in the book presents the tenderness and quaintness, and the full quality of David Harum's character, with the richness and pathos of the story which tells how he paid the "int'rist" upon the "cap'tal" invested by Billy P. Fortunately this story lends itself readily to separate publication, and it forms an American "Christmas Carol" which stands by itself, an American counterpart of the familiar tale of Dickens, and imbued with a simplicity, humor, and unstudied pathos peculiarly its own.

The difference between the written and the acted tale is illustrated in the use made of the Christmas story in the play. In the book David tells John Lenox the story of the Widow Cullom and her dealings with 'Zeke

Swinney, and reveals the truth to her in his office, and the dinner which follows at his house is prolonged by his inimitable tales. In the play action takes the place of description. In the first act we see 'Zeke Swinney obtaining blood-money from the widow, and the latter makes the acquaintance of Mary Blake, newly entered upon her career of independence as Cordelia Prendergast. In the second act we see the widow giving the second mortgage to David, and thereby strengthening Mary Blake's suspicions, and in the third act David pictures his dreary youth and Billy P.'s act of kindness, and brings the widow to her own, the climax coming with the toast which opens the dinner and closes the play. It was a delicate and difficult task for even so distinguished an actor as Mr. Crane to undertake a part already hedged about by conflicting theories; but his insight and his devotion to the character have succeeded in actually placing before us the David Harum created by Mr. Westcott.

The illustrations of this book, reproduced from stage photographs by the courtesy of Mr. Charles Frohman, include the best pictures of Mr. Crane in character, and also stage views of scenes in the second and third acts,

Wm · H · CRANE Edition

The Christmas Story from David Harum

CHAPTER I

T was the 23d of December, and shortly after the closing hour. Peleg had departed and our friend had just locked the vault when David came into the office and around behind the counter.

"Be you in any hurry?" he asked.

John said he was not, whereupon Mr. Harum hitched himself up on to a high office stool, with his heels on the spindle, and leaned sideways upon the desk, while John stood facing him with his left arm upon the desk.

"John," said David, "do ye know the Widdo' Cullom?"

"No," said John, "but I know who she is—a tall, thin woman, who walks with a slight stoop and limp. I noticed her and asked her name because there was something about her looks that attracted my attention—

as though at some time she might have seen better days."

"That's the party," said David. "She has seen better days, but she's eat an' drunk sorro' mostly fer goin' on thirty year, an' darned little else a good share o' the time, I reckon."

"She has that appearance certainly," said John.

"Yes, sir," said David, "she's had a putty tough time, the widdo' has, an' yet," he proceeded after a momentary pause, "the' was a time when the Culloms was some o' the kingpins o' this hull region. They used to own quarter o' the county, an' they lived in the big house up on the hill where Doc Hays lives now. That was considered to be the finest place anywheres 'round here in them days. I used to think the Capitol to Washington must be somethin' like the Cullom house, an' that Billy P. (folks used to call him Billy P. 'cause his father's name was William an' his was William Parker), an' that Billy P. 'd jest 's like 's not be president. I've changed my mind some on the subject of presidents since I was a boy."

Here Mr. Harum turned on his stool, put his right hand into his sack-coat pocket, ex-

tracted therefrom part of a paper of "Maple Dew," and replenished his left cheek with an ample wad of "fine-cut." John took advantage of the break to head off what he had reason to fear might turn into a lengthy digression from the matter in hand by saying, "I beg pardon, but how does it happen that Mrs. Cullom is in such circumstances? Has the family all died out?"

"Wa'al," said David, "they're most on 'em dead, all on 'em, in fact, except the widdo's son Charley, but as fur 's the family 's concerned, it more 'n *died* out—it *gin* out! 'D ye ever hear of Jim Wheton's calf? Wa'al, Jim brought three or four veals into town one spring to sell. Dick Larrabee used to peddle meat them days. Dick looked 'em over an' says, 'Look here, Jim,' he says, 'I guess you got a "deakin" in that lot,' he says. 'I dunno what you mean,' says Jim. 'Yes, ye do, goll darn ye!' says Dick, 'yes, ye do. You didn't never kill that calf, an' you know it. That calf died, that's what that calf done. Come, now, own up,' he says. 'Wa'al,' says Jim, 'I didn't *kill* it, an' it didn't *die* nuther—it jes' kind o' *gin out.*'"

John joined in the laugh with which the narrator rewarded his own effort, and David

went on: "Yes, sir, they jes' petered out. Old Billy, Billy P.'s father, inher'tid all the prop'ty—never done a stroke of work in his life. He had a collige education, went to Europe, an' all that, an' before he was fifty year old he hardly ever come near the old place after he was growed up. The land was all farmed out on shares, an' his farmers mostly bamboozled him the hull time. He got consid'able income, of course, but as things went along and they found out how slack he was they kept bitin' off bigger chunks all the time, an' sometimes he didn't git even the core. But all the time when he wanted money—an' he wanted it putty often, I tell ye —the easiest way was to stick on a morgige; an' after a spell it got so 't he'd have to give a morgige to pay the int'rist on the other morgiges."

"But," said John, "was there nothing to the estate but land?"

"Oh, yes," said David, "old Billy's father left him some consid'able pers'nal, but after that was gone he went into the morgige bus'nis as I tell ye. He lived mostly up to Syrchester and around, an' when he got married he bought a place in Syrchester and lived there till Billy P. was about twelve or thir-

teen year old, an' he was about fifty. By that time he'd got 'bout to the end of his rope, an'

the' wa'n't nothin' for it but to come back here to Homeville an' make the most o' what the' was left—an' that's what he done, let

alone that he didn't make the most on't to any pertic'ler extent. Mis' Cullom, his wife, wa'n't no help to him. She was a city woman an' didn't take to the country no way, but when she died it broke old Billy up wus 'n ever. She peaked an' pined, an' died when Billy P. was about fifteen or so. Wa'al, Billy P. an' the old man wrastled along somehow, an' the boy went to collige fer a year or so. How they ever got along 's they did I dunno. The' was a story that some far-off relation left old Billy some money, an' I guess that an' what they got off'm what farms was left carried 'em along till Billy P. was twenty-five or so, an' then he up an' got married. That was the crownin' stroke," remarked David. "She was one o' the village girls—respectable folks, more 'n ordinary good lookin' an' high steppin', an' had had some schoolin'. But the old man was prouder 'n a cock-turkey, an' thought nobody wa'n't quite good enough fer Billy P., an' all along kind o' reckoned that he'd marry some money an' git a new start. But when he got married—on the quiet, you know, cause he knowed the old man would kick—wa'al, that killed the trick, an' the old man into the bargain. It took the gumption all out of him, an' he didn't live a year.

Wa'al, sir, it was curious, but, 's I was told, putty much the hull village sided with the old man. The Culloms was kind o' kings in them days, an' folks wa'n't so one-man's-good's-anotherish as they be now. They thought Billy P. done wrong, though they didn't have nothin' to say 'gainst the girl neither—an' she's very much respected, Mis' Cullom is, an' as fur's I'm concerned, I've alwus guessed she kept Billy P. goin' full as long 's any one could. But 't wa'n't no use—that is to say, the sure thing come to pass. He had a nom'-nal title to a good deal o' prop'ty, but the equity in most on't if it had ben to be put up wa'n't enough to pay fer the papers. You see, the' ain't never ben no real cash value in farm prop'ty in these parts. The' ain't ben hardly a dozen changes in farm titles, 'cept by inher'tance or foreclosure, in thirty years. So Billy P. didn't make no effort. Int'rist's one o' them things that keeps right on nights an' Sundays. He jest had the deeds made out an' handed 'em over when the time came to settle. The' was some village lots though that was clear, that fetched him in some money from time to time until they was all gone but one, an' that's the one Mis' Cullom lives on now. It was consid'able more'n a lot—in fact,

a putty sizable place. She thought the sun rose an' set where Billy P. was, but she took a crotchit in her head, and wouldn't ever sign no papers fer that, an' lucky fer him too. The' was a house on to it, an' he had a roof over his head anyway when he died six or seven years after he married, an' left her with a boy to raise. How she got along all them years till Charley got big enough to help, I swan! I don't know. She took in sewin' an' washin', an' went out to cook an' nurse, an' all that, but I reckon the' was now an' then times when they didn't overload their stomechs much, nor have to open the winders to cool off. But she held on to that prop'ty of her'n like a pup to a root. It was putty well out when Billy P. died, but the village has growed up to it. The's some good lots could be cut out on't, an' it backs up to the river where the current's enough to make a mighty good power fer a 'lectric light. I know some fellers that are talkin' of startin' a plant here, an' it ain't out o' sight that they'd pay a good price fer the river front, an' enough land to build on. Fact on't is, it's got to be a putty valu'ble piece o' prop'ty, more 'n she cal'lates on, I reckon."

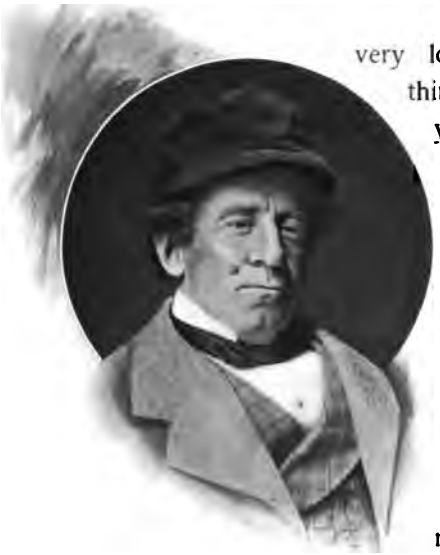
Here Mr. Harum paused, pinching his chin

with thumb and index finger, and mumbling his tobacco. John, who had listened with more attention than interest—wondering the while as to what the narrative was leading up to—thought something might properly be expected of him to show that he had followed it, and said, "So Mrs. Cullom has kept this last piece clear, has she?"

"No," said David, bringing down his right hand upon the desk with emphasis, "that's jes' what she hain't done, an' that's how I come to tell ye somethin' of the story, an' more on't 'n you've cared about hearin', mebbe."

"Not at all," John protested. "I have been very much interested."

"You have, have you?" said Mr. Harum. "Wa'al, I got somethin' I want ye to do. Day after to-morro' 's Chris'mus, an' I want ye to drop Mis' Cullom a line, somethin' like this, 'That Mr. Harum told ye to say that that morgige he holds, havin' ben past due fer some time, an' no int'rist havin' ben paid fer, let me see, more'n a year, he wants to close the matter up, an' he'll see her Chris'-mus mornin' at the bank at nine o'clock, he havin' more time on that day; but that, as fur as he can see, the bus'nis won't take



very long' — somethin' like that, you understand?"

"Very well, sir," said John, hoping that his employer would not see in his face the disgust and repugnance he felt as he surmised what a scheme was on foot, and recalled what he had heard of Harum's hard and unscrupulous ways, though he had to admit that this, excepting perhaps the episode of the counterfeit money, was the first revelation to him personally. But this seemed very bad indeed.

"All right," said David cheerfully, "I s'pose it won't take you long to find out what's in your stockin', an' if you hain't nothin' else to do Chris'mus mornin' I'd like to have you open the office an' stay 'round a spell till I git through with Mis' Cullom. Mebbe the' 'll

be some papers to fill out or witniss or somethin'; an' have that skeezicks of a boy make up the fires so'st the place'll be warm."

"Very good, sir," said John, hoping that the interview was at an end.

But the elder man sat for some minutes apparently in a brown study, and occasionally a smile of sardonic cunning wrinkled his face. At last he said: "I've told ye so much that I may as well tell ye how I come by that morgidge. 'Twon't take but a minute, an' then you can run an' play," he added with a chuckle.

"I trust I have not betrayed any impatience," said John, and instantly conscious of his infelicitous expression, added hastily, "I have really been very much interested."

"Oh, no," was the reply, "you hain't *betrayed* none, but I know old fellers like me gen'rally tell a thing twice over while they're at it. Wa'al," he went on, "it was like this. After Charley Cullom got to be some grown he helped to keep the pot a-bilin', 'n they got on some better. 'Bout seven year ago, though, he up an' got married, an' then the fat ketched fire. Finally he allowed that if he had some money he'd go West 'n take up some land, 'n git along like pussly 'n a flower

gard'n. He ambitioned that if his mother 'd raise a thousan' dollars on her place he'd be sure to take care of the int'rist, an' prob'ly pay off the princ'pal in almost no time. Wa'al, she done it, an' off he went. She didn't come to me fer the money, because—I dunno—at any rate she didn't, but got it of 'Zeke Swinney.

"Wa'al, it turned out jest 's any fool might 've predilictid, fer after the first year, when I reckon he paid it out of the thousan', Charley never paid no int'rist. The second year he was jes' gettin' goin', an' the next year he lost a hoss jest 's he was cal'latin' to pay, an' the next year the grasshoppers smote him, 'n so on; an' the outcome was that at the end of five years, when the morgige had one year to run, Charley'd paid one year, an' she'd paid one, an' she stood to owe three years' int'rist. How old Swinney come to hold off so was that she used to pay the cuss ten dollars or so ev'ry six months 'n git no credit fer it, an' no receipt an' no witniss, 'n he knowed the prop'ty was improving all the time. He may have had another reason, but at any rate he let her run, an' got the shave reg'lar. But at the time I'm tellin' you about he'd begun to cut up, an' allowed that if she

didn't settle up the int'rist he'd foreclose, an' I got wind on't an' I run across her one day an' got to talkin' with her, an' she gin me the hull narration. 'How much do you owe the old critter?' I says. 'A hunderd an' eighty dollars,' she says, 'an' where I'm goin' to git it,' she says, 'the Lord only knows.' 'An' He won't tell ye, I reckon,' I says. Wa'al, of course I'd known that old Swinney had a morgidge because it was a matter of record, an' I knowed him well enough to give a guess what his game was goin' to be, an' more'n that I'd had my eye on that piece an' parcel an' I figured that he wa'n't any likelier a citizen 'n I was." ("Yes," said John to himself, "where the carcase is the vultures are gathered together.")

"'Wa'al,' I says to her, after we'd had a little more talk, 's'posen you come 'round to my place to-morro' 'bout 'leven o'clock, an' mebbe we c'n cipher this thing out. I don't say positive that we kin,' I says, 'but mebbe, mebbe.' So that afternoon I sent over to the county seat an' got a description an' had a second morgige drawed up fer two hundred dollars, an' Mis' Cullom signed it mighty quick. I had the morgige made one day after date, 'cause, as I said to her, it was in

the nature of a temp'rary loan, but she was so tickled she'd have signed most anythin' at that pertic'ler time. 'Now,' I says to her, 'you go an' settle with old Step-an'-fetch-it, but don't you say a word where you got the money,' I says. 'Don't ye let on nothin'—stretch that conscience o' your'n if nes'sary,' I says, 'an' be pertic'ler if he asks you if Dave Harum give ye the money you jes' say, "No, he didn't." That won't be no lie,' I says, 'because I ain't *givin'* it to ye,' I says. Wa'al, she done as I told her. Of course Swinney suspicioned fust off that I was mixed up in it, but she stood him off so fair an' square that he didn't know jes' what *to* think, but his claws was cut fer a spell, anyway.

"Wa'al, things went on fer a while, till I made up my mind that I ought to relieve Swinney of some of his anxieties about worldly bus'nis, an' I dropped in on him one mornin' an' passed the time o' day, an' after we'd eased up our minds on the subjects of each other's health an' such like I says, 'You hold a morgige on the Widder Cullom's place, don't ye?' Of course he couldn't say nothin' but 'yes.' 'Does she keep up the int'rist all right?' I says. 'I don't want to be pokin' my nose into your bus'nis,' I says,

DAVID HARUM, Act II

'an' don't tell me nothin' you don't want to.' Wa'al, he knowed Dave Harum was Dave Harum, an' that he might 's well speak it out, an' he says, 'Wa'al, she didn't pay nothin' fer a good while, but last time she forked over the hull amount. But I hain't no notion,' he says, 'that she'll come to time agin.' 'An' s'posin' she don't,' I says, 'you'll take the prop'ty, won't ye?' 'Don't see no other way,' he says, an' lookin' up quick, 'unless you over-bid me,' he says. 'No,' I says, 'I ain't buyin' no real estate jes' now, but the thing I come in fer,' I says, 'leavin' out the pleasure of havin' a talk with you, was to say that I'd take that morgige off'm your hands.'

"Wa'al, sir, he, he, he, he! Scat my ——! At that he looked at me fer a minute with his jaw on his neck, an' then he hunched himself, 'n drawed in his neck like a mud turtle. 'No,' he says, 'I ain't sufferin' fer the money, an' I guess I'll keep the morgige. It's putty near due now, but mebbe I'll let it run a spell. I guess the secur'ty's good fer it.' 'Yes,' I says, 'I reckon you'll let it run long enough fer the widder to pay the taxes on't once more anyhow; I guess the secur'ty's good enough to take that resk; but how 'bout *my* secur'ty?'

I says. 'What d'you mean?' he says. 'I mean,' says I, 'that I've got a second morgige on that prop'ty, an' I begin to tremble fer my secur'ty. You've jes' told me,' I says, 'that you're goin' to foreclose an' I cal'late to protect myself, an' I *don't* cal'late,' I says, 'to have to go an' bid on that prop'ty, an' put in a lot more money to save my investment, unless I'm 'bleeged to—not *much!* an' you can jes' sign that morgige over to me, an' the sooner the quicker,' I says."

David brought his hand down on his thigh with a vigorous slap, the fellow of the one which, John could imagine, had emphasized his demand upon Swinney. The story, to which he had at first listened with polite patience merely, he had found more interesting as it went on, and, excusing himself, he brought up a stool, and mounting it, said, "And what did Swinney say to that?" Mr. Harum emitted a gurgling chuckle, yawned his quid out of his mouth, tossing it over his shoulder in the general direction of the waste basket, and bit off the end of a cigar which he found by slapping his waistcoat pockets. John got down and fetched him a match, which he scratched in the vicinity of his hip pocket, lighted his cigar (John declining to

join him on some plausible pretext, having on a previous occasion accepted one of the brand), and after rolling it around with his lips and tongue to the effect that the lighted end described sundry eccentric curves, located it firmly with an upward angle in the left-hand corner of his mouth, gave it a couple of vigorous puffs, and replied to John's question.

"Wa'al, 'Zeke Swinney was a perfesser of religion some years ago, an' mebbe he is now, but what he said to me on this pertic'ler occasion was that he'd see me in hell fust, 'an *then* he wouldn't.

"'Wa'al,' I says, 'mebbe you won't, mebbe you will, it's alwus a pleasure to meet ye,' I says, 'but in that case this morgige bus'nis 'll be a question fer our executors,' I says, 'fer *you* don't never foreclose that morgige, an' don't you fergit it,' I says.

"'Oh, you'd like to git holt o' that prop'ty yourself. I see what you're up to,' he says.

"'Look a-here, 'Zeke Swinney,' I says, 'I've got an int'rist in that prop'ty, an' I propose to p'tect it. You're goin' to sign that morgige over to me, or I'll foreclose an' surrygate ye,' I says, 'unless you allow to bid in

DAVID HARUM, Act II

the prop'ty, in which case we'll see whose weasel-skin's the longest. But I guess it won't come to that,' I says. 'You kin take your choice,' I says. 'Whether I want to git holt o' that prop'ty myself ain't neither here nor there. Mebbe I do, an' mebbe I don't, but anyways,' I says, '*you* don't git it, nor wouldn't ever, for if I can't make you sign over, I'll either do what I said or I'll back the widder in a defence fer usury. Put that in your pipe an' smoke it,' I says.

"'What do you mean?' he says, gittin' half out his chair.

"'I mean this,' I says, 'that the fust six months the widder couldn't pay she gin you ten dollars to hold off, an' the next time she gin you fifteen, an' that you've bled her fer shaves to the tune of sixty odd dollars in three years, an' then got your int'rist in full.'

"That riz him clean out of his chair," said David. "'She can't prove it,' he says, shakin' his fist in the air.

"'Oh, ho! ho!' I says, tippin' my chair back agin the wall. 'If Mis' Cullom was to swear how an' where she paid you the money, givin' chapter an' verse, and showin' her own mem'randums even, an' I was to

swear that when I twitted you with gittin' it you didn't deny it, but only said that she

couldn't *prove* it, how long do you think it 'ould take a Freeland County jury to find agin ye? I allow, 'Zeke Swinney,' I says, 'that you wa'n't born yestid'y, but you ain't so old as

you look, not by a dum sight!' an' then how I did laugh!

"Wa'al," said David, as he got down off the stool and stretched himself, yawning, "I guess I've yarned it enough fer one day. Don't fergit to send Mis' Cullom that notice, an' make it up an' up. I'm goin' to git the thing off my mind this trip."

"Very well, sir," said John, "but let me ask, did Swinney assign the mortgage without any trouble?"

"O Lord! yes," was the reply. "The' wa'n't nothin' else fer him to do. I had another twist on him that I hain't mentioned. But he put up a great show of doin' it to obleege me. Wa'al, I thanked him an' so on, an' when we'd got through I ast him if he wouldn't step over to the 'Eagil' an' take somethin', an' he looked kind o' shocked an' said he never drinked nothin'. It was 'gin his princ'ples, he said. Ho, ho, ho, ho! Scat my ——! Princ'ples!" and John heard him chuckling to himself all the way out of the office.

CHAPTER II

CONSIDERING John's relations with David Harum, it was natural that he should wish to think as well of him as possible, and he had not (or thought he had not) allowed his mind to be influenced by the disparaging remarks and insinuations which had been made to him, or in his presence, concerning his employer. He had made up his mind to form his opinion upon his own experience with the man, and so far it had not only been pleasant but favorable, and far from justifying the half-jeering, half-malicious talk that had come to his ears. It had been made manifest to him, it was true, that David was capable of a sharp bargain in certain lines, but it seemed to him that it was more for the pleasure of matching his wits against another's than for any gain involved. Mr. Harum was an experienced and expert horseman, who delighted above all things in dealing in and trading horses, and John soon discovered that, in

that community at least, to get the best of a "hoss-trade" by almost any means was considered a venial sin, if a sin at all, and the standards of ordinary business probity were not expected to govern those transactions.

David had said to him once when he suspected that John's ideas might have sustained something of a shock, "A hoss-trade ain't like anythin' else. A feller may be straighter 'n a string in ev'rythin' else, an' never tell the truth—that is, the hull truth—about a hoss. I trade hosses with hoss-traders. They all think they know as much as I do, an' I dunno but what they do. They hain't learnt no diff'rent anyway, an' they've had chances enough. If a feller come to me that didn't think he knowed anythin' about a hoss, an' wanted to buy on the square, he'd git, fur's I knew, square treatment. At any rate I'd tell him all 't I knew. But when one o' them smart Alecks comes along an' cal'lates to do up old Dave, why he's got to take his chances, that's all. An' mind ye," asserted David, shaking his forefinger impressively, "it ain't only them fellers. I've ben wuss stuck two three time by church members in good standin' than anybody I ever dealed with. Take old Deakin Perkins. He's a terrible

DAVID HARUM, Act III

feller fer church bus'nes; c'n pray an' psalm-sing to beat the Jews, an' in spiritual matters c'n read his title clear the hull time, but when it comes to hoss-tradin' you got to git up very early in the mornin' or he'll skin the eye-teeth out of ye. Yes, sir! Scat my ——! I believe the old critter *makes* hosses! But the deakin," added David, "he, he, he, he! the deakin hain't hardly spoke to me fer some consid'able time, the deakin hain't. He, he, he!

"Another thing," he went on, "the' ain't no gamble like a hoss. You may think you know him through an' through, an' fust thing you know he'll be cuttin' up a lot o' didos right out o' nothin'. It stands to reason that sometimes you let a hoss go all on the square —as you know him—an' the feller that gits him don't know how to hitch him or treat him, an' he acts like a diff'rent hoss, an' the feller allows you swindled him. You see, hosses gits used to places an' ways to a certain extent, an' when they're changed, why they're apt to act diff'rent. Hosses don't know but dreadful little, really. Talk about hoss sense—wa'al, the' ain't no such thing."

Thus spoke David on the subject of his favorite pursuit and pastime, and John thought

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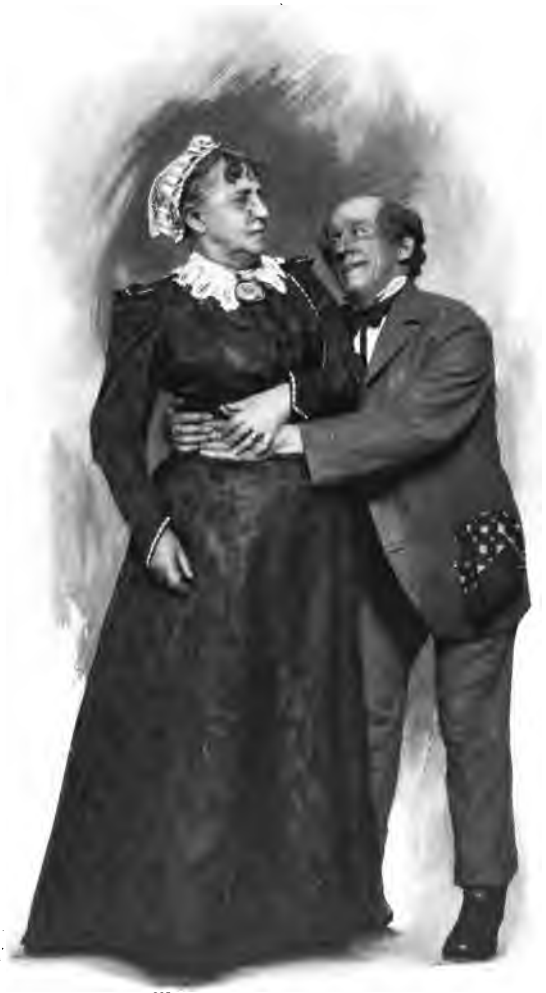

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buffeting gale from the northwest, made it almost impossible to see a path and to keep it. In the central part of the town some tentative efforts had been made to open walks, but these were apparent only as slight and tortuous depressions in the depths of snow. In the outskirts the unfortunate pedestrian had to wade to the knees.

As John went behind the counter his eye was at once caught by a small parcel lying on his desk, of white note paper, tied with a cotton string, which he found to be addressed, "Mr. John Lenox, Esq., Present," and as he took it up it seemed heavy for its size.

Opening it, he found a tiny stocking, knit of white wool, to which was pinned a piece of paper with the legend, "A Merry Christmas from Aunt Polly." Out of the stocking fell a packet fastened with a rubber strap. Inside were five ten-dollar gold pieces and a slip of paper on which was written, "A Merry Christmas from Your Friend David Harum." For a moment John's face burned, and there was a curious smarting of the eyelids as he held the little stocking and its contents in his hand. Surely the hand that had written "Your Friend" on that scrap of paper could not be the hand of an oppressor of widows

and orphans. "This," said John to himself, "is what he meant when he 'supposed it wouldn't take me long to find out what was in my stocking.'"

The door opened and a blast and whirl of wind and snow rushed in, ushering the tall, bent form of the Widow Cullom. The drive of the wind was so strong that John vaulted over the low cash counter to push the door shut again. The poor woman was white with snow from the front of her old worsted hood to the bottom of her ragged skirt.

"You are Mrs. Cullom?" said John. "Wait a moment till I brush off the snow, and then come to the fire in the back room. Mr. Harum will be in directly, I expect."

"Be I much late?" she asked. "I made 's much haste 's I could. It don't appear to me 's if I ever see a blusteriner day, 'n I ain't as strong as I used to be. Seemed as if I never would git here."

"Oh, no," said John, as he established her before the glowing grate of the Franklin stove in the back parlor, "not at all. Mr. Harum has not come in himself yet. Shall you mind if I excuse myself a moment while you make yourself as comfortable as possi-

ble?" She did not apparently hear him. She was trembling from head to foot with cold and fatigue and nervous excitement. Her dress was soaked to the knees, and as she sat down and put up her feet to the fire John saw a bit of a thin cotton stocking and her deplorable shoes, almost in a state of pulp. A snow-obliterated path led from the back door of the office to David's house, and John snatched his hat and started for it on a run. As he stamped off some of the snow on the veranda the door was opened for him by Mrs. Bixbee. "Lord sakes!" she exclaimed. "What on earth be you cavortin' 'round for such a mornin' 's this without no overcoat, an' on a dead run? What's the matter?"

"Nothing serious," he answered, "but I'm in a great hurry. Old Mrs. Cullom has walked up from her house to the office, and she is wet through and almost perished. I thought you'd send her some dry shoes and stockings, and an old shawl or blanket to keep her wet skirt off her knees, and a drop of whisky or something. She's all of a tremble, and I'm afraid she will have a chill."

"Certain! certain!" said the kind creature, and she bustled out of the room, returning in a minute or two with an armful of comforts.

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feller fer church bus'nes; c'n pray an' psalm-sing to beat the Jews, an' in spiritual matters c'n read his title clear the hull time, but when it comes to hoss-tradin' you got to git up very early in the mornin' or he'll skin the eye-teeth out of ye. Yes, sir! Scat my ——! I believe the old critter *makes* hosses! But the deakin," added David, "he, he, he, he! the deakin hain't hardly spoke to me fer some consid'able time, the deakin hain't. He, he, he!

"Another thing," he went on, "the' ain't no gamble like a hoss. You may think you know him through an' through, an' fust thing you know he'll be cuttin' up a lot o' didos right out o' nothin'. It stands to reason that sometimes you let a hoss go all on the square —as you know him—an' the feller that gits him don't know how to hitch him or treat him, an' he acts like a diff'rent hoss, an' the feller allows you swindled him. You see, hosses gits used to places an' ways to a certain extent, an' when they're changed, why they're apt to act diff'rent. Hosses don't know but dreadful little, really. Talk about hoss sense—wa'al, the' ain't no such thing."

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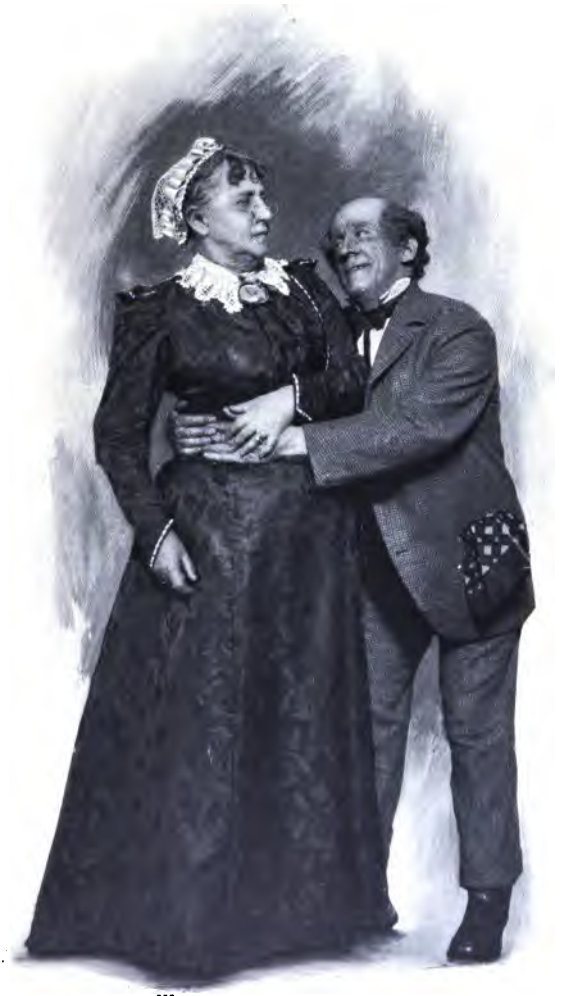

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and leave the two to settle their affair without witness or hearer, but his employer, who, as he had found, usually had a reason for his actions, had explicitly requested him to remain, and he had no choice. He perched himself upon one of the office stools and composed himself to await the conclusion of the affair.

CHAPTER III

MRS. CULLOM was sitting at one corner of the fire, and David drew a chair opposite to her.

"Feelin' all right now? whisky hain't made ye liable to no disorderly conduct, has it?" he asked with a laugh.

"Yes, thank you," was the reply, "the warm things are real comfortin', 'n' I guess I hain't had licker enough to make me want to throw things. You got a kind streak in ye, Dave Harum, if you did send me this here note—but I s'pose ye know your own bus'-nis," she added with a sigh of resignation. "I ben fearin' fer a good while 't I couldn't hold on t' that prop'ty, an' I don't know but what you might's well git it as 'Zeke Swinney, though I ben hopin' 'gainst hope that Charley 'd be able to do morn 'n he has."

"Let's see the note," said David curtly. "H'm, humph, 'regret to say that I have been instructed by Mr. Harum'—wa'al,

h'm'm, cal'lated to clear his own skirts anyway—h'm'm—'must be closed up without further delay' (John's eye caught the little white stocking which still lay on his desk)—'wa'al, yes, that's about what I told Mr. Lenox to say fur's the bus'nis part's concerned—I might 'a' done my own regrettin' if I'd wrote the note myself." (John said something to himself.) "'T ain't the pleasantest thing in the world fer ye, I allow, but then you see, bus'nis is bus'nis."

John heard David clear his throat, and there was a hiss in the open fire. Mrs. Cullom was silent, and David resumed:

"You see, Mis' Cullom, it's like this. I ben thinkin' of this matter fer a good while. That place ain't ben no real good to ye sence the first year you signed that morgidge. You hain't scurcely more'n made ends meet, let alone the int'rist, an' it's ben simply a question o' time, an' who'd git the prop'ty in the long run fer some years. I reckoned, same as you did, that Charley 'd mebbe come to the front—but he hain't done it, an' 't ain't likely he ever will. Charley's a likely 'nough boy some ways, but he hain't got much 'git there' in his make-up, not more'n enough fer one anyhow, I reckon. That's about the size on't, ain't it?"

Mrs. Cullom murmured a feeble admission that she was "'fraid it was."

"Wa'al," resumed Mr. Harum, "I see how

things was goin', an' I see that unless I played euchre, 'Zeke Swinney 'd git that prop'ty, an' whether I wanted it myself or not, I didn't

cal'late he sh'd git it anyway. He put a spoke in my wheel once, an' I hain't forgot it. But that hain't neither here nor there. Wa'al," after a short pause, "you know I helped ye pull the thing along on the chance, as ye may say, that you an' your son 'd somehow make a go on't."

"You ben very kind, so fur," said the widow faintly.

"Don't ye say that, don't ye say that," protested David. "'T wa'n't no kindness. It was jes' bus'nis. I wa'n't takin' no chances, an' I s'pose I might let the thing run a spell longer if I c'd see any use in't. But the' ain't, an' so I ast ye to come up this mornin' so 't we c'd settle the thing up without no fuss, nor trouble, nor lawyer's fees, nor nothin'. I've got the papers all drawed, an' John—Mr. Lenox—here to take the acknowlidgments. You hain't no objection to windin' the thing up this mornin', have ye?"

"I s'pose I'll have to do whatever you say," replied the poor woman in a tone of hopeless discouragement, "an' I might as well be killed to once, as to die by inch pieces."

"All right then," said David cheerfully, ignoring her lethal suggestion, "but before

we git down to bus'nis an' signin' papers, an' in order to set myself in as fair a light 's I can in the matter, I want to tell ye a little story."

"I hain't no objection 's I know of," acquiesced the widow graciously.

"All right," said David, "I won't preach more 'n about up to the sixthly—How'd you feel if I was to light up a cigar? I hain't much of a hand at a yarn, an' if I git stuck, I c'n puff a spell. Thank ye. Wa'al, Mis' Cullom, you used to know somethin' about my folks. I was raised on Buxton Hill. The' was nine on us, an' I was the youngest o' the lot. My father farmed a piece of about forty to fifty acres, an' had a small shop where he done odd times small jobs of tinkerin' fer the neighbors when the' was anythin' to do. My mother was his second, an' I was the only child of that marriage. He married agin when I was about two year old, an' how I ever got raised 's more 'n I c'n tell ye. My sister Polly was 'sponsible more 'n any one, I guess, an' the only one o' the whole lot that ever gin me a decent word. Small farmin' ain't cal'lated to fetch out the best traits of human nature—an' keep 'em out—an' it seems to me sometimes that when the old man wa'n't cuffin' my ears he was lickin' me with a rawhide or a strap.

Fur 's that was concerned, all his boys used to ketch it putty reg'lar till they got too big. One on 'em up an' licked him one night, an' lit out next day. I s'pose the old man's disposition was sp'iled by what some feller said farmin' was, 'workin' all day, an' doin' chores all night,' an' larrupin' me an' all the rest on us was about all the enjoyment he got. My brothers an' sisters—'ceptin' of Polly—was putty nigh as bad in respect of cuffs an' such like; an' my stepmarm was, on the hull, the wust of all. She hadn't no childern o' her own, an' it appeared 's if I was jes' pizen to her. 'T wa'n't so much slappin' an' cuffin' with her as 't was tongue. She c'd say things that 'd jes' raise a blister like pizen ivy. I s'pose I *was* about as ord'nary, no-account-lookin', red-headed, freckled little cuss as you ever see, an' slinkin' in my manners. The air of our home circle wa'n't cal'lated to raise heroes in.

"I got three four years' schoolin', an' made out to read an' write an' cipher up to long division 'fore I got through, but after I got to be six years old, school or no school, I had to work reg'lar at anything I had strength fer, an' more too. Chores before school an' after school, an' a two-mile walk to git there. As

fur 's clo'es was concerned, any old thing that 'd hang together was good enough fer me; but by the time the older boys had outgrowed their duds, an' they was passed on to me, the' wa'n't much left on 'em. A pair of old cow-hide boots that leaked in more snow an' water 'n they kept out, an' a couple pairs of woolen socks that was putty much all darns, was expected to see me through the winter, an' I went barefoot f'm the time the snow was off the ground till it flew agin in the fall. The' wa'n't but two seasons o' the year with me—them of chilblains an' stun-bruises."

The speaker paused and stared for a moment into the comfortable glow of the fire, and then discovering to his apparent surprise that his cigar had gone out, lighted it from a coal picked out with the tongs.

"Farmin' 's a hard life," remarked Mrs. Cullom with an air of being expected to make some contribution to the conversation.

"An' yit, as it seems to me as I look back on't," David resumed pensively, "the wust on't was that nobody ever gin me a kind word, 'cept Polly. I s'pose I got kind o' used to bein' cold an' tired; dressin' in a snowdrift where it blowed into the attic, an' goin' out to fodder cattle 'fore sun-up; pickin' up stun in

the blazin' sun, an' doin' all the odd jobs my father set me to, an' the older ones shirked onto me. That was the reg'lar order o' things; but I remember I never *did* git used to never pleasin' nobody. 'Course I didn't expect nothin' f'm my step-marm, an' the only way I ever knowed I'd done my stent fur 's father was concerned, was that he didn't say nothin'. But sometimes the older one's 'd git settin' 'round, talkin' an' laughin', havin' pop corn an' apples, an' that, an' I'd kind o' sidle up, wantin' to join 'em, an' some on 'em 'd say, 'What *you* doin' here? time you was in bed,' an' give me a shove or a cuff. Yes, ma'am," looking up at Mrs. Cullom, "the wust on't was that I was kind o' scairt the hull time. Once in a while Polly 'd give me a mossel o' comfort, but Polly wa'n't but little older 'n me, an' bein' the youngest girl, was chored most to death herself."

It had stopped snowing, and though the wind still came in gusty blasts, whirling the drift against the windows, a wintry gleam of sunshine came in and touched the widow's wrinkled face.

"It's amazin' how much trouble an' sorrer the' is in the world, an' how soon it begins," she remarked, moving a little to avoid the sun-

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light. "I hain't never ben able to reconcile how many good things the' be, an' how little most on us gits o' them. I hain't ben to meetin' fer a long spell 'cause I hain't had no fit clo'es, but I remember most of the preachin' I've set under either dwelt on the wrath to come, or else on the Lord's doin' all things well, an' providin'. I hope I ain't no wickeder 'n than the gen'ral run, but it's putty hard to hev faith in the Lord's providin' when you hain't got nothin' in the house but corn meal, an' none too much o' that."

"That's so, Mis' Cullom, that's so," affirmed David. "I don't blame ye a mite. 'Doubts assail, an' oft prevail,' as the hymn-book says, an' I reckon it's a sight easier to have faith on meat an' potatoes 'n it is on corn meal mush. Wa'al, as I was sayin'—I hope I ain't tirin' ye with my goin's on?"

"No," said Mrs. Cullom, "I'm engaged to hear ye, but nobody 'd suppose to see ye now that ye was such a f'lorn little critter as you make out."

"It's jest as I'm tellin' ye, an' more also, as the Bible says," returned David, and then, rather more impressively, as if he were leading up to his conclusion, "it come along to a time when I was 'twixt thirteen an' fourteen.

The' was a cirkis billed to show down here in Homeville, an' ev'ry barn an' shed fer miles around had pictures stuck on to 'em of el'phants, an' rhinoceroses, an' ev'ry animul that went into the ark; an' girls ridin' bareback an' jumpin' through hoops, an' fellers ridin' bareback an' turnin' summersets, an' doin' turnovers on swings; an' clowns gettin' hosswhipped, an' ev'ry kind of a thing that could be pictered out; an' how the' was to be a grand percession at ten o'clock, 'ith golden chariots, an' scripteral allegories, an' the hull bus'nis; an' the gran' performance at two o'clock; admission twenty-five cents, children under twelve, at cetery, an' so forth. Wa'al, I hadn't no more idee o' goin' to that cirkis 'n I had o' flyin' to the moon, but the night before the show somethin' waked me 'bout twelve o'clock. I don't know how 't was. I'd ben helpin' mend fence all day, an' gen'ally I never knowed nothin' after my head struck the bed till mornin'. But that night, anyhow, somethin' waked me, an' I went an' looked out the windo', an' there was the hull thing goin' by the house. The' was more or less moon, an' I see the el'phant, an' the big wagins—the drivers kind o' noddin' over the dashboards—an' the chariots with canvas cov-

ers—I don't know how many of 'em—an' the cages of the tigers an' lions, an' all. Wa'al, I got up the next mornin' at sun-up an' done my chores; an' after breakfust I set off fer the ten-acre lot where I was mendin' fence. The ten-acre was the farthest off of any, Homeville way, an' I had my dinner in a tin pail so't I needn't lose no time goin' home at noon, an', as luck would have it, the' wa'n't nobody with me that mornin'. Wa'al, I got down to the lot an' set to work; but somehow I couldn't git that show out o' my head nohow. As I said, I hadn't no more notion of goin' to that cirkis 'n I had of kingdom come. I'd never had two shillin' of my own in my hull life. But the more I thought on't the uneasier I got. Somethin' seemed pullin' an' haulin' at me, an' fin'ly I gin in. I allowed I'd see that percession anyway if it took a leg, an' mebbe I c'd git back 'ithout nobody missin' me. 'T any rate, I'd take the chances of a lickin' jest once—fer that's what it meant—an' I up an' put fer the village lickity-cut. I done them four mile lively, I c'n tell ye, an' the stun-bruises never hurt me once.

"When I got down to the village it seemed to me as if the hull population of Freeland County was there. I'd never seen so

many folks together in my life, an' fer a spell it seemed to me as if ev'rybody was a-lookin' at me an' sayin', 'That's old Harum's boy Dave, playin' hookey,' an' I sneaked 'round dreadin' somebody 'd give me away; but I fin'ly found that nobody wa'n't payin' any attention to me—they was there to see the show, an' one red-headed boy more or less wa'n't no pertic'ler account. Wa'al, putty soon the percession hove in sight, an' the' was a reg'lar stampede among the boys, an' when it got by, I run an' ketched up with it agin, an' walked alongside the el'phant, tin pail an' all, till they fetched up inside the tent. Then I went off to one side—it must 'a' ben about 'leven or half-past, an' eat my dinner—I had a devourin' appetite—an' thought I'd jes' walk round a spell, an' then light out fer home. But the' was so many things to see an' hear—all the side-show pictures of Fat Women, an' Livin' Skelitons; an' Wild Women of Madygasker, an' Wild Men of Borneo; an' snakes windin' round women's necks; hand-orgins; fellers that played the 'cordion, an' mouth-pipes, an' drum an' cymbals all to once, an' such like—that I fergot all about the time an' the ten-acre lot, an' the stun fence, an' fust I knowed the folks was makin' fer the ticket

wagin, an' the band begun to play inside the tent. Be I taxin' your patience over the limit?" said David, breaking off in his story and addressing Mrs. Cullom more directly.

"No, I guess not," she replied; "I was jes' thinkin' of a circus I went to once," she added with an audible sigh.

"Wa'al," said David, taking a last farewell of the end of his cigar, which he threw into the grate, "mebbe what's comin' 'ill int'rist ye more 'n the rest on't has. I was standin' gawpin' 'round, list'nin' to the band an' watchin' the folks git their tickets, when all of a suddin I felt a twitch at my hair—it had a way of workin' out of the holes in my old chip straw hat—an' somebody says to me, 'Wa'al, sonny, what you thinkin' of?' he says. I looked up, an' who do you s'pose it was? It was Billy P. Cullom! I knowed who he was, fer I'd seen him before, but of course he didn't know me. Yes, ma'am, it was Billy P., an' wa'n't he rigged out to kill!"

The speaker paused and looked into the fire, smiling. The woman started forward facing him, and clasping her hands, cried, "My husband! What 'd he have on?"

"Wa'al," said David slowly and reminis-

cently, "near 's I c'n remember, he had on a blue broadcloth claw-hammer coat with flat gilt buttons, an' a double-breasted plaid velvet vest, an' pearl-gray pants, strapped down over his boots, which was of shiny leather, an' a high pointed collar an' blue stock with a pin in it (I remember wonderin' if it c'd be real gold), an' a yeller-white plug beaver hat."

At the description of each article of attire Mrs. Cullom nodded her head, with her eyes fixed on David's face, and as he concluded she broke out breathlessly, "Oh, yes! Oh, yes! David, he wore them very same clo'es, an' he took me to that very same show that very same night!" There was in her face a look almost of awe, as if a sight of her long-buried past youth had been shown to her from a coffin.

Neither spoke for a moment or two, and it was the widow who broke the silence. As David had conjectured, she was interested at last, and sat leaning forward with her hands clasped in her lap.

"Well," she exclaimed, "ain't ye goin' on? What did he say to ye?"

"Cert'nly, cert'nly," responded David. "I'll tell ye near 's I c'n remember, an' I c'n remember putty near. As I told ye. I felt a

twitch at my hair, an' he said, 'What be you thinkin' about, sonny?' I looked up at him, an' looked away quick. 'I dunno,' I says, diggin' my big toe into the dust; an' then, I dunno how I got the spunk to, for I was shyer 'n a rat, 'Guess I was thinkin' 'bout mendin' that fence up in the ten-acre lot 's much 's anythin',' I says.

"'Ain't you goin' to the cirkis?' he says.

"'I hain't got no money to go to cirkises,' I says, rubbin' the dusty toes o' one foot over t' other, 'nor nothin' else,' I says.

"'Wa'al,' he says, 'why don't you crawl under the canvas?'

"That kind o' riled me, shy 's I was. 'I don't crawl under no canvases,' I says. 'If I can't go in same 's other folks, I'll stay out,' I says, lookin' square at him fer the fust time. He wa'n't exac'ly smilin', but the' was a look in his eyes that was the next thing to it."

"Lordy me!" sighed Mrs. Cullom, as if to herself. "How well I can remember that look; jest as if he was laughin' at ye, an' wa'n't laughin' at ye, an' his arm around your neck!"

David nodded in reminiscent sympathy, and rubbed his bald poll with the back of his hand.

"Wa'al," interjected the widow.

"Wa'al," said David, resuming, "he says to me, 'Would you like to go to the cirkis?' an' with that it occurred to me that I did want to go to that cirkis more'n anythin' I ever wanted to before—nor since, it seems to me. But I tell ye the truth, I was so far f'm expectin' to go 't I really hadn't knowed I wanted to. I looked at him, an' then down agin, an' began tenderin' up a stun-bruise on one heel agin the other instep, an' all I says was, bein' so dum'd shy, 'I dunno,' I says. But I guess he seen in my face what my feelin's was, fer he kind o' laughed an' pulled out half-a-dollar an' says: 'D' you think you could git a couple o' tickits in that crowd? If you kin, I think I'll go myself, but I don't want to git my boots all dust,' he says. I allowed I c'd try; an' I guess them bare feet o' mine tore up the dust some gettin' over to the wagin. Wa'al, I had another scare gettin' the tickits, fer fear some one that knowed me 'd see me with a half-a-dollar, an' think I must 'a' stole the money. But I got 'em an' carried 'em back to him, an' he took 'em an' put 'em in his vest pocket, an' handed me a ten-cent piece, an' says, 'Mebbe you'll want somethin' in the way of refreshments fer yourself an' mebbe

the el'phant,' he says, an' walked off toward the tent; an' I stood stun still, lookin' after him. He got off about a rod or so an" stopped an' looked back. 'Ain't you comin'?' he says.

"'Be I goin' with *you*?' I says.

"'Why not?' he says, 'nless you'd ruther go alone,' an' he put his finger an' thumb into his vest pocket. Wa'al, ma'am, I looked at him a minute, with his shiny hat an' boots, an' fine clo'es, an' gold pin, an' thought of my ragged ole shirt, an' cotton pants, an' ole chip hat with the brim most gone, an' my tin pail an' all. 'I ain't fit to,' I says, ready to cry—an'—wa'al, he jes' laughed, an' says, 'Nonsense,' he says, 'come along. A man needn't be ashamed of his workin' clo'es,' he says, an' I'm dum'd if he didn't take holt of my hand, an' in we went that way together."

"How like him that was!" said the widow softly.

"Yes, ma'am, yes, ma'am, I reckon it was," said David, nodding.

"Wa'al," he went on after a little pause, "I was ready to sink into the ground with shyniss at fust, but that wore off some after a little, an' we two seen the hull show, I *tell* ye. We walked 'round the cages, an' we fed the

el'phant—that is, he bought the stuff an' I fed him. I 'member—he, he, he!—'t he says, 'mind you git the right end,' he says, an' then we got a couple o' seats, an' the doin's begun."

CHAPTER IV

THE widow was looking at David with shining eyes and devouring his words. All the years of trouble and sorrow and privation were wiped out, and she was back in the days of her girlhood. Ah, yes! how well she remembered him as he looked that very day—so handsome, so splendidly dressed, so debonair; and how proud she had been to sit by his side that night, observed and envied of all the village girls.

"I ain't goin' to go over the hull show," proceeded David, "well 's I remember it. The' didn't nothin' git away from me that afternoon, an' once I come near to stickin' a piece o' gingerbread into my ear 'stid o' my mouth. I had my ten-cent piece that Billy P. give me, but he wouldn't let me buy nothin'; an' when the gingerbread man come along he says, 'Air ye hungry, Dave? (I'd told him my name), air ye hungry?' Wa'al, I was a growin' boy, an' I was hungry putty much all the

time. He bought two big squares an' gin me one, an' when I'd swallered it, he says, 'Guess you better tackle this one too,' he says, 'I've dined.' I didn't exac'ly know what 'dined' meant, but—he, he, he, he!—I tackled it," and David smacked his lips in memory.

"Wa'al," he went on, "we done the hull programmy — gingerbread, lemonade — *pink* lemonade, an' he took some o' that—pop corn, peanuts, pep'mint candy, cin'mun candy—scat my ——! an' he payin' fer ev'rythin'—I thought he was jes' made o' money! An' I remember how we talked about all the doin's; the ridin', an' jumpin', an' summersettin', an' all—fer he'd got all the shyniss out of me for the time—an' once I looked up at him, an' he looked down at me with that curious look in his eyes an' put his hand on my shoulder. Wa'al, now, I tell ye, I had a queer, crinkly feelin' go up an' down my back, an' I like to up an' cried."

"Dave," said the widow, "I kin see you two as if you was settin' there front of me. He was alwus like that. Oh, my! Oh, my! David," she added solemnly, while two tears rolled slowly down her wrinkled face, "we lived together, husban' an' wife, fer seven year, an' he never give me a cross word."

"I don't doubt it a mossel," said David simply, leaning over and poking the fire, which operation kept his face out of her sight and was prolonged rather unduly. Finally he straightened up and, blowing his nose as it were a trumpet, said :

"Wa'al, the cirkis fin'ly come to an end, an' the crowd hustled to git out 's if they was afraid the tent 'd come down on 'em. I got kind o' mixed up in 'em, an' somebody tried to git my tin pail, or I thought he did, an' the upshot was that I lost sight o' Billy P., an' couldn't make out to ketch a glimpse of him nowhere. An' *then* I kind o' come down to earth, kerchug! It was five o'clock, an' I had better 'n four mile to walk—mostly up hill—an' if I knowed anything 'bout the old man, an' I thought I *did*, I had the all-firedist lickin' ahead of me 't I'd ever got, an' that was sayin' a good deal. But, boy 's I was, I had grit enough to allow 't was wuth it, an' off I put."

"Did he lick ye much?" inquired Mrs. Cullom anxiously.

"Wa'al," replied David, "he done his best. He was layin' fer me when I struck the front gate—I knowed it wa'n't no use to try the back door, an' he took me by the ear—

most pulled it off—an' marched me off to the barn shed without a word. I never see him so mad. Seemed like he couldn't speak fer a while, but fin'ly he says, 'Where you ben all day?'

"'Down t' the village,' I says.

"'What you ben up to down there?' he says.

"'Went to the cirkis,' I says, thinkin' I might 's well make a clean breast on't.

"'Where 'd you git the money?' he says.

"'Mr. Cullom took me,' I says.

"'You lie,' he says. 'You stole the money somewheres, an' I'll trounce it out of ye, if I kill ye,' he says.

"Wa'al," said David, twisting his shoulders in recollection, "I won't harrer up your feelin's. 'S I told you, he done his best. I was willin' to quit long 'fore he was. Fact was, he overdone it a little, an' he had to throw water in my face 'fore he got through; an' he done that as thorough as the other thing. I was somethin' like a chickin jest out o' the cistern. I crawled off to bed the best I could, but I didn't lay on my back fer a good spell, I c'n tell ye."

"You poor little critter," exclaimed Mrs.

Cullom sympathetically. "You poor little critter!"

"'T was more'n wuth it, Mis' Cullom," said David emphatically. "I'd had the most enjoy'ble day, I might say the only enjoy'ble day, .'t I'd ever had in my hull life, an' I hain't never fergot it. I got over the lickin' in course of time, but I've ben enjoyin' that cirkis fer forty year. The' wa'n't but one thing to hender, an' that's this, that I hain't never ben able to remember—an' to this day I lay awake nights tryin' to—that I said 'Thank ye' to Billy P., an' I never seen him after that day."

"How's that?" asked Mrs. Cullom.

"Wa'al," was the reply, "that day was the turnin' point with me. The next night I lit out with what duds I c'd git together, an' as much grub 's I could pack in that tin pail; an' the next time I see the old house on Buxton Hill the' hadn't ben no Harums in it fer years."

Here David rose from his chair, yawned and stretched himself, and stood with his back to the fire. The widow looked up anxiously into his face. "Is that all?" she asked after a while.

"Wa'al, it is an' it ain't. I've got through

yarnin' about Dave Harum at any rate, an' mebbe we'd better have a little confab on your matters, seein' 't I've got you 'way up here such a mornin' 's this. I gen'ally do bus'nis fust an' talkin' afterward," he added, "but I kind o' got to goin' an' kept on this time."

He put his hand into the breast pocket of his coat and took out three papers, which he shuffled in review as if to verify their identity, and then held them in one hand, tapping them softly upon the palm of the other, as if at a loss how to begin. The widow sat with her eyes fastened upon the papers, trembling with nervous apprehension. Presently he broke the silence.

"About this here morgige o' your'n," he said. "I sent ye word that I wanted to close the matter up, an' seein' 't you're here an' come fer that purpose, I guess we'd better make a job on't. The' ain't no time like the present, as the sayin' is."

"I s'pose it'll hev to be as you say," said the widow in a shaking voice.

"Mis' Cullom," said David solemnly, "*you* know, an' I know, that I've got the repitation of bein' a hard, graspin', schemin' man. Mebbe I be. Mebbe I've ben hard done by all my hull life, an' have had to be; an' mebbe,

now 't I've got ahead some, it's got to be second nature, an' I can't seem to help it. 'Bus'nis is bus'nis' ain't part of the golden rule, I allow, but the way it gen'ally runs, fur 's I've found out, is, 'Do unto the other feller the way he'd like to do unto you, an' do it fust.' But, if you want to keep this thing a-runnin' as it's goin' on now fer a spell longer, say one year, or two, or even three, you may, only I've got somethin' to say to ye 'fore ye elect."

"Wa'al," said the poor woman, "I expect it 'd only be pilin' up wrath agin the day o' wrath. I can't pay the int'rist now without starvin', an' I hain't got no one to bid in the prop'ty fer me if it was to be sold."

"Mis' Cullom," said David, "I said I'd got somethin' more to tell ye, an' if, when I git through, you don't think I've treated you right, includin' this mornin's confab, I hope you'll fergive me. It's this, an' I'm the only person livin' that 's knowin' to it, an' in fact I may say that I'm the only person that ever was really knowin' to it. It was before you was married, an' I'm sure he never told ye, fer I don't doubt he fergot all about it, but your husband, Billy P. Cullom, that was, made a small investment once on a time, yes, ma'am, he did, an' in his kind of careless way it jes'

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slipped his mind. The amount of cap'tal he put in wa'n't large, but the rate of int'rist was uncommon high. Now, he never drawed no dividends on't, an' they've ben 'cumulatin' fer forty year, more or less, at compound int'rist."

The widow started forward, as if to rise from her seat. David put his hand out gently and said, "Jest a minute, Mis' Cullom, jest a minute, till I git through. Part o' that cap'tal," he resumed, "consistin' of a quarter an' some odd cents, was invested in the cirkis bus'nis, an' the rest on't—the cap'tal, an' all the cash cap'tal that I started in bus'nis with —was the ten cents your husband give me that day, an' here," said David, striking the papers in his left hand with the back of his right, "*here* is the *dividends!* This here second morgige, not bein' on record, may jest as well go onto the fire—it's gettin' low—an' here's a satisfaction piece which I'm goin' to execute now, that'll clear the thousan' dollar one. Come in here, John," he called out.

The widow stared at David for a moment speechless, but as the significance of his words dawned upon her, the blood flushed darkly in her face. She sprang to her feet and, throwing up her arms, cried out: "My Lord! My

Lord! Dave! Dave Harum! Is it true?—tell me it's true! You ain't foolin' me, air ye, Dave? You wouldn't fool a poor old woman that never done ye no harm, nor said a mean word agin ye, would ye? Is it true? an' is my place clear? an' I don't owe nobody anythin'—I mean, no money? Tell it agin. Oh, tell it agin! Oh, Dave! it's too good to be true! Oh! Oh! Oh, *my!* an' here I be cryin' like a great baby, an', an' "—fumbling in her pocket—"I do believe I hain't got no hank'chif.—Oh, thank ye," to John; "I'll do it up an' send it back to-morrer.—Oh, what made ye do it, Dave?"

"Set right down an' take it easy, Mis' Cullom," said David soothingly, putting his hands on her shoulders and gently pushing her back into her chair. "Set right down an' take it easy.—Yes," to John, "I acknowledge that I signed that."

He turned to the widow, who sat wiping her eyes with John's handkerchief.

"Yes, ma'am," he said, "it's as true as anythin' kin be. I wouldn't no more fool ye, ye know I wouldn't, don't ye? than I'd—jerk a hoss," he asseverated. "Your place is clear now, an' by this time to-morro' the' won't be the scratch of a pen agin it. I'll send the

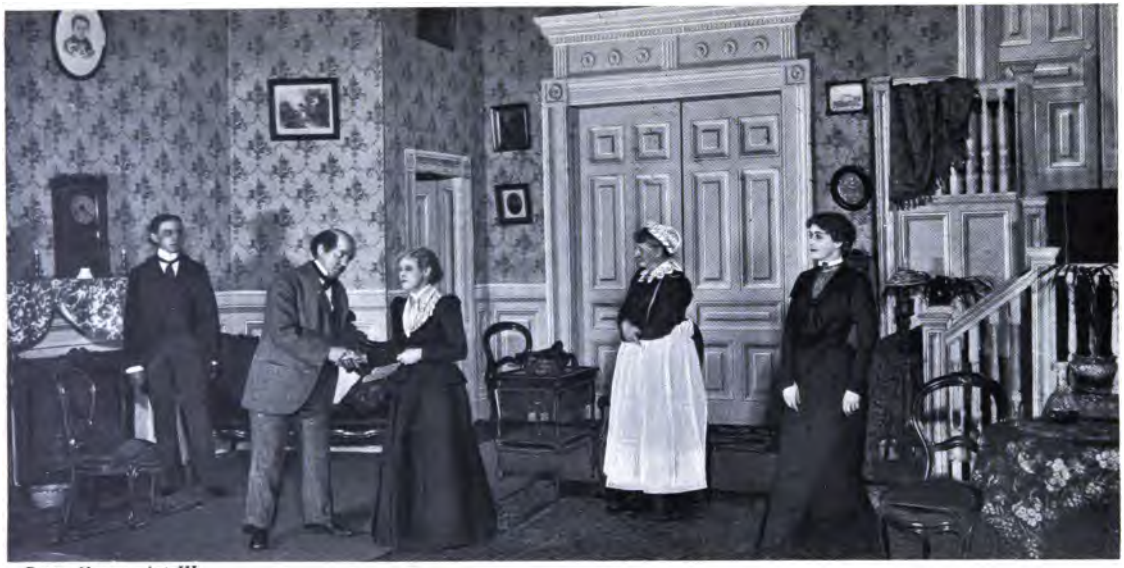
satisfaction over fer record fust thing in the mornin'."

"But, Dave," protested the widow, "I s'pose ye know what you're doin'——?"

"Yes," he interposed, "I cal'late I do, putty near. You ast me why I done it, an' I'll tell ye if ye want to know. I'm payin' off an old score, an' gettin' off cheap, too. That's what I'm doin'! I thought I'd hinted up to it putty plain, seein' 't I've talked till my jaws ache; but I'll sum it up to ye if ye like."

He stood with his feet aggressively wide apart, one hand in his trousers pocket, and holding in the other the "morgige," which he waved from time to time in emphasis.

"You c'n estimate, I reckon," he began, "what kind of a bringin'-up I had, an' what a poor, mis'able, God-fersaken, scairt-to-death little forlorn critter I was; put upon, an' snubbed, an' jawed at till I'd come to believe myself—what was rubbed into me the hull time—that I was the most all-'round no-account animul that was ever made out o' dust, an' wa'n't ever likely to be no diff'rent. Lookin' back, it seems to me that—exceptin' of Polly—I never had a kind word said to me, nor a day's fun. Your husband, Billy P. Cullom, was the fust man that ever treated me



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human up to that time. He give me the only enjoy'ble time 't I'd ever had, an' I don't know 't anythin' 's ever equaled it since. He spent money on me, an' he give me money to spend —that had never had a cent to call my own— *an'*, Mis' Cullom, he took me by the hand, an' he talked to me, an' he gin me the fust notion 't I'd ever had that mebbe I wa'n't only the scum o' the earth, as I'd ben teached to believe. I told ye that that day was the turnin' point of my life. Wa'al, it wa'n't the lickin' I got, though that had somethin' to do with it, but I'd never have had the spunk to run away 's I did if it hadn't ben for the heartenin' Billy P. gin me, an' never knowed it, an' never knowed it," he repeated mournfully. "I alwus allowed to pay some o' that debt back to him, but seein' 's I can't do that, Mis' Cullom, I'm glad an' thankful to pay it to his widdo'."

"Mebbe he knows, Dave," said Mrs. Cullom softly.

"Mebbe he does," assented David in a low voice.

Neither spoke for a time, and then the widow said: "David, I can't thank ye 's I ought ter—I don't know how—but I'll pray fer ye night an' mornin' 's long 's I got breath.

An', Dave," she added humbly, "I want to take back what I said about the Lord's providin'."

She sat a moment, lost in her thoughts, and then exclaimed, "Oh, it don't seem 's if I c'd wait to write to Charley!"

"I've wrote to Charley," said David, "an' told him to sell out there an' come home, an' to draw on me fer any balance he needed to move him. I've got somethin' in my eye that'll be easier an' better payin' than fightin' grasshoppers an' drought in Kansas."

"Dave Harum!" cried the widow, rising to her feet, "you ought to 'a' ben a king!"

"Wa'al," said David with a grin, "I don't know much about the kingin' bus'nis, but I guess a cloth cap 'n' a hoss whip 's more 'n my line than a crown an' scepter. An' now," he added, "'s we've got through 'th our bus'nis, s'pose you step over to the house an' see Polly. She's expectin' ye to dinner. Oh, yes," replying to the look of deprecation in her face as she viewed her shabby frock, "you an' Polly c'n prink up some if you want to, but we can't take 'No' fer an answer Chris'-must day, clo'es or no clo'es."

"I'd really like ter," said Mrs. Cullom.

"All right then," said David cheerfully.

"The path is swep' by this time, I guess, an' I'll see ye later. Oh, by the way," he exclaimed, "the's somethin' I fergot. I want to make you a proposition, ruther an onusual one, but seein' ev'rythin' is as 't is, perhaps you'll consider it."

"Dave," declared the widow, "if I could, an' you ast for it, I'd give ye anythin' on the face o' this mortal globe!"

"Wa'al," said David, nodding and smiling, "I thought that mebbe, long 's you got the int'rist of that investment we ben talkin' about, you'd let me keep what's left of the princ'pal. Would ye like to see it?"

Mrs. Cullom looked at him with a puzzled expression without replying.

David took from his pocket a large wallet, secured by a strap, and, opening it, extracted something enveloped in a much faded brown paper. Unfolding this, he displayed upon his broad fat palm an old silver dime black with age.

"There's the cap'tal," he said.

CHAPTER V

"WHY, Mis' Cullom, I'm real glad to see ye. Come right in," said Mrs. Bixbee as she drew the widow into the "wing settin' room," and proceeded to relieve her of her wraps and her bundle. "Set right here by the fire while I take these things of your'n into the kitchen to dry 'em out. I'll be right back"; and she bustled out of the room. When she came back Mrs. Cullom was sitting with her hands in her lap, and there was in her eyes an expression of smiling peace that was good to see.

Mrs. Bixbee drew up a chair, and seating herself, said: "Wa'al, I don't know when I've seen ye to git a chance to speak to ye, an' I was real pleased when David said you was goin' to be here to dinner. An' my! how well you're lookin'—more like Cynthy Sweetland than I've seen ye fer I don't know when; an' yet," she added, looking curiously at her guest, "you 'pear somehow as if you'd ben cryin'."

"You're real kind, I'm sure," responded Mrs. Cullom, replying to the other's welcome and remarks *seriatim;* "I guess, though, I don't look much like Cynthy Sweetland, if I do feel twenty years younger 'n I did a while ago; an' I have ben cryin', I allow, but not fer sorro', Polly Harum," she exclaimed, giving the other her maiden name. "Your brother Dave comes putty nigh to bein' an angel!"

"Wa'al," replied Mrs. Bixbee with a twinkle, "I reckon Dave might hev to be fixed up some afore he come out in that pertic'ler shape, but," she added impressively, "'es fur as bein' a *man* goes, he's 'bout 's good 's they make 'em. I know folks thinks he's a hard bargainer, an' close-fisted, an' some on 'em that ain't fit to lick up his tracks says more'n that. He's got his own ways, I'll allow, but down at bottom, an' all through, I know the' ain't no better man livin'. No, ma'am, the' ain't, an' what he's ben to me, Cynthy Cullom, nobody knows but me—an' —an'—mebbe the Lord—though I hev seen the time," she said tentatively, "when it seemed to me 't I knowed more about my affairs 'n He did," and she looked doubtfully at her companion, who had been following her with affirmative and sympathetic nods,

and now drew her chair a little closer, and said softly: "Yes, yes, I know. I ben putty doubtful an' rebellious myself a good many times, but seems now as if He had had me in His mercy all the time." Here Aunt Polly's sense of humor asserted itself. "What's Dave ben up to now?" she asked.

And then the widow told her story, with tears and smiles, and the keen enjoyment which we all have in talking about ourselves to a sympathetic listener like Aunt Polly, whose interjections pointed and illuminated the narrative. When it was finished she leaned forward and kissed Mrs. Cullom on the cheek.

"I can't tell ye how glad I be for ye," she said; "but if I'd known that David held that morgige, I could hev told ye ye needn't hev worried yourself a mite. He wouldn't never have taken your prop'ty, more'n he'd rob a hen-roost. But he done the thing his own way—kind o' fetched it round fer a Merry Chris'mus, didn't he?"

CHAPTER VI

DAVID'S house stood about a hundred feet back from the street, facing the east. The main body of the house was of two stories (through which ran a deep bay in front), with mansard roof. On the south were two stories of the "wing," in which were the "settin' room," Aunt Polly's room, and, above, David's quarters. Ten minutes or so before one o'clock John rang the bell at the front door.

"Sairy's busy," said Mrs. Bixbee apologetically as she let him in, "an' so I come to the door myself."

"Thank you very much," said John. "Mr. Harum told me to come over a little before one, but perhaps I ought to have waited a few minutes longer."

"No, it's all right," she replied, "for mebbe you'd like to wash an' fix up 'fore dinner, so I'll jes' show ye where to," and she led the way upstairs and into the "front parlor bedroom."

"There," she said, "make yourself comf'table, an' dinner 'll be ready in about ten minutes."

For a moment John mentally rubbed his eyes. Then he turned and caught both of Mrs. Bixbee's hands and looked at her, speechless. When he found words he said: "I don't know what to say, nor how to thank you properly. I don't believe you know how kind this is."

"Don't say nothin' about it," she protested, but with a look of great satisfaction. "I done it jes' t' relieve my mind, because ever sence you fus' come I ben worryin' over your bein' at that nasty tavern," and she made a motion to go.

"You and your brother," said John earnestly, still holding her hands, "have made me a gladder and happier man this Christmas day than I have been for a very long time."

"I'm glad on't," she said heartily, "an' I hope you'll be comf'table an' contented here. I must go now an' help Sairy dish up. Come down to the settin' room when you're ready," and she gave his hands a little squeeze.

"Aunt Po——, I beg pardon, Mrs. Bixbee," said John, moved by a sudden impulse, "do you think you could find it in your heart

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to complete my happiness by giving me a kiss? It's Christmas, you know," he added smilingly.

Aunt Polly colored to the roots of her hair. "Wa'al," she said, with a little laugh, "seein' 't I'm old enough to be your mother, I guess 't won't hurt me none," and as she went down the stairs she softly rubbed her lips with the side of her forefinger.

John understood now why David had looked out of the bank window so often that morning. All his belongings were in Aunt Polly's best bedroom, having been moved over from the Eagle while he and David had been in the office. A delightful room it was, in immeasurable contrast to his squalid surroundings at that hostelry. The spacious bed, with its snowy counterpane and silk patchwork "comf'table" folded on the foot, the bright fire in the open stove, the big bureau and glass, the soft carpet, the table for writing and reading standing in the bay, his books on the broad mantel, and his dressing things laid out ready to his hand, not to mention an ample supply of *dry* towels on the rack.

The poor fellow's life during the weeks which he had lived in Homeville had been

utterly in contrast with any previous experience. Nevertheless he had tried to make the best of it, and to endure the monotony, the dullness, the entire lack of companionship and entertainment with what philosophy he could muster. The hours spent in the office were the best part of the day. He could manage to find occupation for all of them, though a village bank is not usually a scene of active bustle. Many of the people who did business there diverted him somewhat, and most of them seemed never too much in a hurry to stand around and talk the sort of thing that interested them. After John had got acquainted with his duties and the people he came in contact with, David gave less personal attention to the affairs of the bank; but he was in and out frequently during the day, and rarely failed to interest his cashier with his observations and remarks.

But the long winter evenings had been very bad. After supper, a meal which revolted every sense, there had been as many hours to be got through with as he found wakeful, an empty stomach often adding to the number of them, and the only resource for passing the time had been reading, which had often been well-nigh impossible for sheer

physical discomfort. As has been remarked, the winter climate of the middle portion of New York State is as bad as can be imagined. His light was a kerosene lamp of half-candle power, and his appliance for warmth consisted of a small wood stove, which (as David would have expressed it) "took two men an' a boy" to keep in action, and was either red hot or exhausted.

As from the depths of a spacious lounging chair he surveyed his new surroundings, and contrasted them with those from which he had been rescued out of pure kindness, his heart was full, and it can hardly be imputed to him as a weakness that for a moment his eyes filled with tears of gratitude and happiness—no less.

Indeed, there were four happy people at David's table that Christmas day. Aunt Polly had "smartened up" Mrs. Cullom with collar and cuffs, and in various ways which the mind of man comprehendeth not in detail; and there had been some arranging of her hair as well, which altogether had so transformed and transfigured her that John thought that he should hardly have known her for the forlorn creature whom he had encountered in the morning. And as he looked at the still fine

eyes, large and brown, and shining for the first time in many a year with a soft light of happiness, he felt that he could understand how it was that Billy P. had married the village girl.

Mrs. Bixbee was grand in black silk and lace collar fastened with a shell-cameo pin not quite as large as a saucer, and John caught the sparkle of a diamond on her plump left hand —David's Christmas gift—with regard to which she had spoken apologetically to Mrs. Cullom:

"I told David that I was ever so much obliged to him, but I didn't want a dimun' more'n a cat wanted a flag, an' I thought it was jes' throwin' away money. But he would have it—said I c'd sell it an' keep out the poor-house some day, mebbe."

David had not made much change in his usual raiment, but he was shaved to the blood, and his round red face shone with soap and satisfaction. As he tucked his napkin into his shirt collar, Sairy brought in the tureen of oyster soup, and he remarked, as he took his first spoonful of the stew, that he was "hungry 'nough t' eat a graven imidge," a condition that John was able to sympathize with after his two days of fasting on crackers and

such provisions as he could buy at Purse's. It was, on the whole, he reflected, the most enjoyable dinner that he ever ate. Never was such a turkey; and to see it give way under David's skillful knife—wings, drumsticks, second joints, side bones, breast—was an elevating and memorable experience. And such potatoes, mashed in cream; such boiled onions, turnips, Hubbard squash, succotash, stewed tomatoes, celery, cranberries, "currant jell!" Oh! and to "top off" with, a mince pie to die for and a pudding (new to John, but just you try it some time) of steamed Indian meal and fruit, with a sauce of cream sweetened with shaved maple sugar.

"What'll you have?" said David to Mrs. Cullom, "dark meat? white meat?"

"Anything," she replied meekly, "I'm not partic'ler. Most any part of a turkey 'll taste good, I guess."

"All right," said David. "Don't care means a little o' both. I alwus know what to give Polly—piece o' the second jint an' the last-thing-over-the-fence. Nice 'n rich fer scraggly folks," he remarked. "How fer you, John?—little o' both, eh?" and he heaped the plate till our friend begged him to keep something for himself.

"Little too much is jes' right," he asserted.

When David had filled the plates and handed them along—Sairy was for bringing in and taking out; they did their own helping to vegetables and "passin'"—he hesitated a moment, and then got out of his chair and started in the direction of the kitchen door.

"What's the matter?" asked Mrs. Bixbee in surprise. "Where you goin'?"

"Woodshed!" said David.

"Woodshed!" she exclaimed, making as if to rise and follow.

"You set still," said David. "Somethin' I fergot."

"What on earth?" she exclaimed, with an air of annoyance and bewilderment. "What do you want in the woodshed? Can't you set down an' let Sairy git it fer ye?"

"No," he asserted with a grin. "Sairy might sqush it. It must be putty meller by this time." And out he went.

"Manners!" ejaculated Mrs. Bixbee. "You'll think (to John) we're reg'ler heathin'."

"I guess not," said John, smiling and much amused.

Presently Sairy appeared with four tumblers

which she distributed, and was followed by David bearing a bottle. He seated himself and began a struggle to unwire the same with an ice-pick. Aunt Polly leaned forward with a look of perplexed curiosity.

"What you got there?" she asked.

"Vewve Clikot's universal an' suv'rin remedy," said David, reading the label and bringing the corners of his eye and mouth almost together in a wink to John, "fer toothache, earache, burns, scalds, warts, dispepsy, fallin' o' the hair, windgall, ringbone, spavin, disapp'inted affections, an' pips in hens," and out came the cork with a "*wop*," at which both the ladies, even Mrs. Cullom, jumped and cried out.

"David Harum," declared his sister with conviction, "I believe thet that's a bottle of champagne."

"If it ain't," said David, pouring into his tumbler, "I ben swindled out o' four shillin'," and he passed the bottle to John, who held it up inquiringly, looking at Mrs. Bixbee.

"No, thank ye," she said with a little toss of the head, "I'm a son o' temp'rence. I don't believe," she remarked to Mrs. Cullom, "thet that bottle ever cost *less* 'n a dollar." At which remarks David apparently "swallered

somethin' the wrong way," and for a moment or two was unable to proceed with his dinner. Aunt Polly looked at him suspiciously. It was her experience that, in her intercourse with her brother, he often laughed utterly without reason—so far as she could see.

"I've always heard it was dreadful expensive," remarked Mrs. Cullom.

"Let me give you some," said John, reaching toward her with the bottle. Mrs. Cullom looked first at Mrs. Bixbee and then at David.

"I don't know," she said. "I never tasted any."

"Take a little," said David, nodding approvingly.

"Just a swallow," said the widow, whose curiosity had got the better of scruples. She took a swallow of the wine.

"How do you like it," asked David.

"Well," she said as she wiped her eyes, into which the gas had driven the tears, "I guess I could get along if I couldn't have it regular."

"Don't taste good?" suggested David with a grin.

"Well," she replied, "I never did care any great for cider, and this tastes to me about as

if I was drinkin' cider an' snuffin' horseredish at one and the same time."

"How's that, John?" said David, laughing.

"I suppose it's an acquired taste," said John, returning the laugh and taking a mouthful of the wine with infinite relish. "I don't think I ever enjoyed a glass of wine so much, or," turning to Aunt Polly, "ever enjoyed a dinner so much," which statement completely mollified her feelings, which had been the least bit in the world "set edgeways."

"Mebbe your app'tite's got somethin' to do with it," said David, shoveling a knife-load of good things into his mouth. "Polly, this young man's ben livin' on crackers an' salt herrin' fer a week."

"My land!" cried Mrs. Bixbee with an expression of horror. "Is that reelly so? 'T ain't now, reelly?"

"Not quite so bad as that," John answered, smiling; "but Mrs. Elright has been ill for a couple of days and—well, I have been foraging around Purse's store a little."

"Wa'al, of all the mean shames!" exclaimed Aunt Polly indignantly. "David Harum, you'd ought to be ridic'lous t' allow such a thing."

"Wa'al, I never!" said David, holding his

DAVID HARUM, Act III

knife and fork straight up in either fist as they rested on the table, and staring at his sister. "I believe if the meetin'-house roof was to blow off you'd lay it on to me somehow. I hain't ben runnin' the Eagle tavern fer quite a consid'able while. You got the wrong pig by the ear as usual. Jes' you pitch into him," pointing with his fork to John. "It's his funeral, if anybody's."

"Wa'al," said Aunt Polly, addressing John in a tone of injury, "I do think you might have let somebody know; I think you'd ortter 've known——"

"Yes, Mrs. Bixbee," he interrupted, "I did know how kind you are and would have been, and if matters had gone on so much longer I should have appealed to you, I should have indeed; but really," he added, smiling at her, "a dinner like this is worth fasting a week for."

"Wa'al," she said, mollified again, "you won't git no more herrin' 'nless you ask for 'em."

"That is just what your brother said this morning," replied John, looking at David with a laugh.

CHAPTER VII

THE meal proceeded in silence for a few minutes. Mrs. Cullom had said but little, but John noticed that her diction was more conventional than in her talk with David and himself in the morning, and that her manner at the table was distinctly refined, although she ate with apparent appetite, not to say hunger. Presently she said, with an air of making conversation, "I suppose you've always lived in the city, Mr. Lenox?"

"It has always been my home," he replied, "but I have been away a good deal."

"I suppose folks in the city go to theaters a good deal," she remarked.

"They have a great many opportunities," said John, wondering what she was leading up to. But he was not to discover, for David broke in with a chuckle.

"Ask Polly, Mis' Cullom," he said. "She c'n tell ye all about the theater, Polly kin."

Mrs. Cullom looked from David to Mrs. Bixbee, whose face was suffused.

"Tell her," said David, with a grin.

"I wish you'd shet up," she exclaimed. "I sha'n't do nothin' of the sort."

"Ne' mind," said David cheerfully. "*I'll* tell ye, Mis' Cullom."

"Dave Harum!" expostulated Mrs. Bixbee, but he proceeded without heed of her protest.

"Polly an' I," he said, "went down to New York one spring some years ago. Her nerves was some wore out 'long of diff'rences with Sairy about clearin' up the woodshed, an' bread risin's, an' not bein' able to suit herself up to Purse's in the qual'ty of silk velvit she wanted fer a Sunday-go-to-meetin' gown, an' I thought a spell off 'd do her good. Wa'al, the day after we got there I says to her while we was havin' breakfust—it was picked-up el'phant on toast, near 's I c'n remember, wa'n't it, Polly?"

"That's as near the truth as most o' the rest on't so fur," said Polly with a sniff.

"Wa'al, I says to her," he proceeded, untouched by her scorn, "'How'd you like to go t' the theater? You hain't never ben,' I says, 'an' now you're down here you may

jes' as well see somethin' while you got a chanst,' I says. Up to that *time*," he remarked, as it were in passing, "she'd ben somewhat pre*juced* 'ginst theaters, an'——"

"Wa'al," Mrs. Bixbee broke in, "I guess what we see that night was cal'lated——"

"You hold on," he interposed. "I'm tellin' this story. You had a chanst to an' wouldn't. Anyway," he resumed, "she allowed she'd try it once, an' we agreed we'd go somewheres that night. But somethin' happened to put it out o' my mind, an' I didn't think on't agin till I got back to the hotel fer supper. So I went to the feller at the news-stand an' says, 'Got any show-tickits fer to-night?'

"'Theater?' he says.

"'I reckon so,' I says.

"'Wa'al,' he says, 'I hain't got nothin' now but two seats fer "Clyanthy."

"'Is it a good show?' I says—'moral, an' so on? I'm goin' to take my sister, an' she's a little pertic'ler about some things,' I says. He kind o' grinned, the feller did. 'I've took my wife twice, an' she's putty pertic'ler herself,' he says, laughin'."

"She must 'a' ben," remarked Mrs. Bixbee with a sniff that spoke volumes of her opin-

ion of "the feller's wife." David emitted a chuckle.

"Wa'al," he continued. "I took the tickits on the feller's recommend, an' the fact of his wife's bein' so pertic'ler, an' after supper we went. It was a mighty handsome place inside, gilded an' carved all over like the outside of a cirkis wagin, an' when we went in the orchestry was playin' an' the people was comin' in, an' after we'd set a few minutes I says to Polly, 'What do you think on't?' I says.

"'I don't see anythin' very unbecomin' so fur, an' the people looks respectable enough,' she says.

"'No jail birds in sight fur 's ye c'n see so fur, be they?' I says. He, he, he, he!"

"You needn't make me out more of a gump 'n I was," protested Mrs. Bixbee. "An' you was jest as——" David held up his finger at her.

"Don't you sp'ile the story by discountin' the sequil. Wa'al, putty soon the band struck up some kind of a dancin' tune, an' the curt'in went up, an' a girl come prancin' down to the footlights an' begun singin' an' dancin', an', scat my ——! to all human appearances you c'd 'a' covered ev'ry dum thing she had

on with a postage stamp." John stole a glance at Mrs. Cullom. She was staring at the speaker with wide-open eyes of horror and amazement.

"I guess I wouldn't go very *fur* into pertic'lers," said Mrs. Bixbee in a warning tone.

David bent his head down over his plate and shook from head to foot, and it was nearly a minute before he was able to go on. "Wa'al," he said, "I heard Polly give a kind of a gasp an' a snort, 's if some one 'd throwed water 'n her face. But she didn't say nothin', an', I swan! I didn't dast to look at her fer a spell; an' putty soon in come a hull crowd more girls that had left their clo'es in their trunks or somewhere, singin', an' dancin', an' weavin' 'round on the stage, an' after a few minutes I turned an' looked at Polly. He, he, he, he!"

"David Harum," cried Mrs. Bixbee, "ef you're goin' to discribe any more o' them scand'lous goin's on I sh'll take my victuals into the kitchen. *I* didn't see no more of 'em," she added to Mrs. Cullom and John, "after that fust trollop appeared."

"I don't believe she did," said David, "fer when I turned she set there with her eyes shut tighter 'n a drum, an' her mouth shut

too so's her nose an' chin most come together, an' her face was red enough so 't a streak o' red paint 'd 'a' made a white mark on it. 'Polly,' I says, 'I'm afraid you ain't gettin' the wuth o' your money.'

"'David Harum,' she says, with her mouth shut all but a little place in the corner toward me, 'if you don't take me out o' this place, I'll go without ye,' she says.

"'Don't you think you c'd stan' it a little longer?' I says. 'Mebbe they've sent home fer their clo'es,' I says. He, he, he, he! But with that she jes' give a hump to start, an' I see she meant bus'nis. When Polly Bixbee," said David impressively, "puts that foot o' her'n *down* somethin's got to sqush, an' don't you fergit it." Mrs. Bixbee made no acknowledgment of this tribute to her strength of character. John looked at David.

"Yes," he said, with a solemn bend of the head, as if in answer to a question, "I squshed. I says to her, 'All right. Don't make no disturbance more'n you c'n help, an' jes' put your hank'chif up to your nose 's if you had the nosebleed,' an' we squeezed out of the seats, an' sneaked up the aisle, an' by the time we got out into the entry I guess my

face was as red as Polly's. It couldn't 'a' ben no redder," he added.

"You got a putty fair color as a gen'ral thing," remarked Mrs. Bixbee dryly.

"Yes, ma'am; yes, ma'am, I expect that's so," he assented, "but I got an extra coat o' tan follerin' you out o' that theater. When we got out into the entry one o' them fellers that stands 'round steps up to me an' says, 'Ain't your ma feelin' well?' he says. 'Her feelin's has ben a trifle rumpled up,' I says, 'an' that gen'ally brings on the nosebleed,' an' then," said David, looking over Mrs. Bixbee's head, "the feller went an' leaned up agin the wall."

"David Harum!" exclaimed Mrs. Bixbee, "that's a downright *lie*. You never spoke to a soul, an'—an'—ev'rybody knows 't I ain't more 'n four years older 'n you be."

"Wa'al, you see, Polly," her brother replied in a smooth tone of measureless aggravation, "the feller wa'n't acquainted with us, an' he only went by appearances."

Aunt Polly appealed to John: "Ain't he enough to—to—I d' know what?"

"I really don't see how you live with him," said John, laughing.

Mrs. Cullom's face wore a faint smile, as

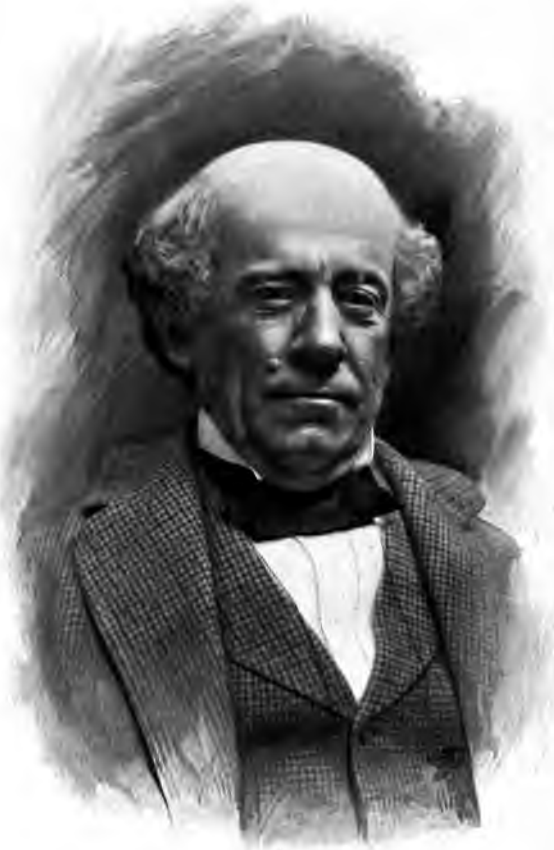
if she were conscious that something amusing was going on, but was not quite sure what. The widow took things seriously for the most part, poor soul.

"I reckon you haven't followed theater-goin' much after that," she said to her hostess.

"No, ma'am," Mrs. Bixbee replied with emphasis, "you better believe I hain't. I hain't never thought of it sence without tinglin' all over. I believe," she asserted. "that David 'd 'a' stayed the thing out if it hadn't ben fer me; but as true 's you live, Cynthy Cullom, I was so 'shamed at the little 't I did see that when I come to go to bed I took my clo'es off in the dark."

David threw back his head and roared with laughter. Mrs. Bixbee looked at him with unmixed scorn. "If I couldn't help makin' a——" she began, "I'd——"

"Oh, Lord! Polly," David broke in, "be sure 'n wrap up when you go out. If you sh'd ketch cold an' your sense o' the ridic'lous sh'd strike in you'd be a dead-'n'-goner sure." This was treated with the silent contempt which it deserved, and David fell upon his dinner with the remark that "he guessed he'd better make up fer lost time," though as



a matter of fact while he had done most of the talking he had by no means suspended another function of his mouth while so engaged.

For a time nothing more was said which did not relate to the replenishment of plates, glasses, and cups. Finally David cleaned up his plate with his knife blade and a piece of bread, and pushed it away with a sigh of fullness, mentally echoed by John.

"I feel 's if a child could play with me," he remarked. "What's comin' now, Polly?"

"The's a mince pie, an' Injun puddin' with maple sugar an' cream, an' ice cream," she replied.

"Mercy on us!" he exclaimed. "I guess I'll have to go an' jump up an' down on the verandy. How do you feel, John? I s'pose you got so used to them things at the Eagle 't you won't have no stomech fer 'em, eh? Wa'al, fetch 'em along. May 's well die fer the ole sheep 's the lamb; but, Polly Bixbee, if you've got designs on my life, I may 's well tell ye right now 't I've left all my prop'ty to the Institution fer Disappinted Hoss Swappers."

"That's putty near next o' kin, ain't it?"

was the unexpected rejoinder of the injured Polly.

"Wa'al, scat my——!" exclaimed David, hugely amused, "if Polly Bixbee hain't made a joke! You'll git yourself into the almanic, Polly, fust thing you know." Sairy brought in the pie and then the pudding.

"John," said David, "if you've got a pencil an' a piece o' paper handy I'd like to have ye take down a few of my last words 'fore we proceed to the pie an' puddin' bus'nis. Any more 'hossredish' in that bottle?" holding out his glass. "Hi, hi! that's enough. You take the rest on't," which John did, nothing loath.

David ate his pie in silence, but before he made up his mind to attack the pudding, which was his favorite confection, he gave an audible chuckle, which elicited Mrs. Bixbee's notice.

"What you gigglin' 'bout now?" she asked.

David laughed. "I was thinkin' of somethin' I heard up to Purse's last night," he said as he covered his pudding with the thick cream sauce. "Amri Shapless has ben gittin' married."

"Wa'al, I declare!" she exclaimed.

"That ole shack! Who in creation could he git to take him?"

"Lize Annis is the lucky woman," replied David with a grin.

"Wa'al, if that don't beat all!" said Mrs. Bixbee, throwing up her hands, and even from Mrs. Cullom was drawn a "Well, I never!"

"Fact," said David, "they was married yestidy forenoon. Squire Parker done the job. Dominie White wouldn't have nothin' to do with it!"

"Squire Parker 'd ortter be 'shamed of himself," said Mrs. Bixbee indignantly.

"Don't you think that trew love had ought to be allowed to take its course?" asked David with an air of sentiment.

"I think the squire 'd ortter be 'shamed of himself," she reiterated. "S'pose them two old skinamulinks was to go an' have children?"

"Polly, you make me blush," protested her brother. "Hain't you got no respect fer the holy institution of matrimuny?—and—at cet'ry?" he added, wiping his whole face with his napkin.

"Much as you hev, I reckon," she retorted. "Of all the amazin' things in this

world, the amazinist to me is the kind of people that gits married to each other in gen'-ral; but this here performence beats ev'rything holler."

"Amri give a very good reason for't," said David with an air of conviction, and then he broke into a laugh.

"Ef you got anythin' to tell, tell it," said Mrs. Bixbee impatiently.

"Wa'al," said David, taking the last of his pudding into his mouth, "if you insist on't, painful as 't is. I heard Dick Larrabee tellin' 'bout it. Amri told Dick day before yestiday that he was thinkin' of gettin' married, an' ast him to go along with him to Parson White's an' be a witniss, an' I reckon a kind of moral support. When it comes to moral supportin'," remarked David in passing, "Dick's as good 's a professional, an' he'd go an' see his gran'mother hung sooner 'n miss anythin', an' never let his cigar go out durin' the performence. Dick said he congratilated Am on his choice, an' said he reckoned they'd be putty ekally yoked together, if nothin' else."

Here David leaned over toward Aunt Polly and said, protestingly, "Don't gi' me but jest a teasp'nful o' that ice cream. I'm so full now 't I can't hardly reach the table." He took a

taste of the cream and resumed: "I can't give it jest as Dick did," he went on, "but this is about the gist on't. Him, an' Lize, an' Am went to Parson White's about half after seven o'clock an' was showed into the parler, an' in a minute he come in, an' after sayin' 'Good evenin'' all 'round, he says, 'Well, what c'n I do fer ye?' lookin' at Am an' Lize, an' then at Dick.

"'Wa'al,' says Am, 'me an' Mis' Annis here has ben thinkin' fer some time as how we'd ought to git married.'

"'*Ought* to git married?' says Parson White, scowlin' fust at one an' then at t'other.

"'Wa'al,' says Am, givin' a kind o' shuffle with his feet, 'I didn't mean *ortter* exac'ly, but jest as *well*—kinder comp'ny,' he says. 'We hain't neither on us got nobody, an' we thought we might 's well.'

"'What have you got to git married on?' says the dominie after a minute. 'Anythin'?' he says.

"'Wa'al,' says Am, droppin' his head sideways an' borin' into his ear 'ith his middle finger, 'I got the promise mebbe of a job o' work fer a couple o' days next week.' 'H'm'm'm,' says the dominie, lookin' at him. 'Have *you* got anythin' to git married on?'

the dominie says, turnin' to Lize. 'I've got ninety cents comin' to me fer some work I done last week,' she says, wiltin' down on to the sofy an' beginnin' to snivvle. Dick says that at that the dominie turned round an' walked to the other end of the room, an' he c'd see he was dyin' to laugh, but he come back with a straight face.

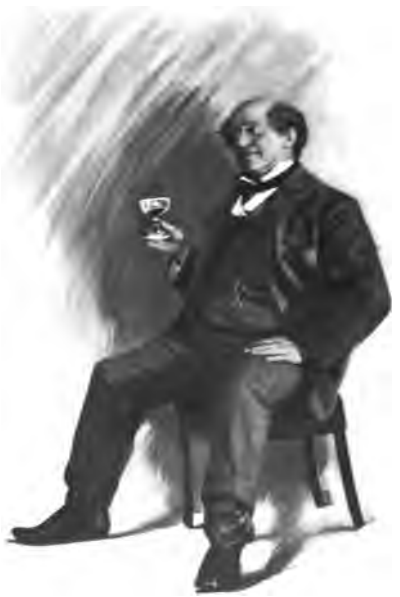
"'How old air you, Shapless?' he says to Am. 'I'll be fifty-eight or mebbe fifty-nine come next spring,' says Am.

"'How old air *you?*' the dominie says, turnin' to Lize. She wriggled a minute an' says, 'Wa'al, I reckon I'm all o' thirty,' she says."

"All o' thirty!" exclaimed Aunt Polly. "The woman 's most 's old 's I be."

David laughed and went on with, "Wa'al, Dick said at that the dominie give a kind of a choke, an' Dick he bust right out, an' Lize looked at him as if she c'd eat him. Dick said the dominie didn't say anythin' fer a minute or two, an' then he says to Am, 'I suppose you c'n find somebody that'll marry you, but I cert'inly won't, an' what possesses you to commit such a piece o' folly,' he says, 'passes my understandin'. What earthly reason have you fer wantin' to marry? On your

own showin',' he says, 'neither one on you 's got a cent o' money or any settled way o' gettin' any.'



"'That's jes' the very reason,' says Am, 'that's jes' the *very reason.* I hain't got nothin', an' Mis' Annis hain't got nothin', an' we figured that we'd jes' better git married an'

settle down, an' make a good home fer us both,' an' if that ain't good reasonin'," David concluded, "I don't know what is."

"An' be they actially married?" asked Mrs. Bixbee, still incredulous of anything so preposterous.

"So Dick says," was the reply. "He says Am an' Lize come away f'm the dominie's putty down in the mouth, but 'fore long Amri braced up an' allowed that if he had half a dollar he'd try the squire in the mornin', an' Dick let him have it. I says to Dick, 'You're out fifty cents on that deal,' an' he says, slappin' his leg, 'I don't give a dum,' he says; 'I wouldn't 'a' missed it fer double the money.'"

Here David folded his napkin and put it in the ring, and John finished the cup of clear coffee which Aunt Polly, rather under protest, had given him. Coffee without cream and sugar was incomprehensible to Mrs. Bixbee.

THE END